The role of party interest articulation in the personalist-authoritarian regimes of the Central Asian Republics of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan

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What is the role of political parties in Central Asian authoritarianism? Scholarly analysis suggests parties have no meaningful role in structuring political behaviour in the region because they lack agency to contribute to the elite bargaining and popular mobilisation which typically helps sustain non-democratic leaders. While it is true parties are devoid of agency from their patrons, this study finds that they perform a role related to the articulation of private elite interests. Examining examples from Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan this study identifies two broad models of party interest articulation which can be found in the region: a *leveraging model* where a party is utilised by political elites as they seek legislative leverage to protect and extend their financial and political interests; and a *coordinating model* where the party is used by a president to integrate their political and economic assets. Neither of these models are uniform and party dynamics is dependent upon the specific nature of the personalist regime. In Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, elites who established leveraging parties found themselves eventually marginalised or expunged at the expense of the president's party. In Turkmenistan, however, in an effort to appeal to foreign investors the president has permitted the creation of an alternative party which leverages in the interest of the country's leading oligarch. The article demonstrates that rather than being irrelevant, parties are an important element of the mosaic of authoritarianism in the region especially regarding the structuring of elite competition and the struggle for power and influence.

Key words: Central Asia, authoritarianism, patronal politics, political parties, interest articulation

Introduction

Parties have endured as objects of enquiry in political science because they 'have been widely regarded as playing a central role in both the theory and the practice of modern liberal democracy, constituting a vital link between the sovereign people and the politicians to whom the exercise of the affairs of the state is temporarily entrusted' (Luther and Müller-Rommel 2002: 1). In other words, parties act as the bridge, the bond and assemblage between the interests of the *demos* and the execution of power and authority. Parties, therefore, are a consistent and necessary element of a functioning modern liberal democracy through their role as articulators of interests (Stokes 1999; Rosenblum 2008).

Political parties have also proven central to authoritarian systems. To date, in the study of contemporary authoritarianism political parties are observed as performing roles pertaining to elite bargaining and mobilisation (Magaloni and Kricheli, 2009, 124-25). But like democracies, not all authoritarian systems are the same. And in the personalist authoritarian regimes of Central Asia parties do not retain these competencies. Pro-presidential parties, such as *Nur Otan* (Light of Fatherland) in Kazakhstan, the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan

(DPT) and The People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan (PDPT) do not possess agency distinct from their presidential patrons which allows them to exercise authority in the process of elite bargaining and mobilisation (Isaacs and Whitmore 2014). Consequently, like parliaments, and other formal institutions, parties in Central Asia have long been viewed as lacking any meaningful role because their existence is bequeathed only at the behest of the leader and they possess no decision-making capacity (Brancati 2014, 317). If parliaments in Central Asia are the 'rubber stamps' (Olcott 1994, 37), then political parties are the 'stampers', the bodies in unison through which authoritarian legislative politics is committed to law. Thus, parties in the region are considered 'virtual', 'false constructions' and a 'façade' (Wilson 2005; Bader 2010; Ó Beacháin and Kevlihan 2017). Furthermore, they are perceived to be undermined by a lack of genuine party competition, weak institutionalisation and limited legislative capacity (Ibraimov et al, 2016; Doolotkeldieva and Wolters 2015). This leaves us with a puzzle. If parties are to be dismissed as meaningless then what is their role? If they do not possess functions typical of parties in authoritarian regimes, then how exactly do they support political elites in Central Asia? This study finds that parties do have a role in Central Asian political systems specific to the personalist authoritarian context. They serve as platforms for the articulation and representation of political and economic interests of informal elite groups.

Interest aggregation and articulation are fundamental duties of parties in democratic systems as they act to either express, collect and balance competing interests, values and preferences (Almond and Coleman 1960). In post-Soviet societies the weakness of civil society and lack of multi-party institutionalisation has been viewed as impinging on the development of party systems and the overall political health of the region (Kangas 1995; Roy 2005; Tsertsvadze 2017). This implies that parties, given they tend to serve the region's ruling elites, do not undertake any duty associated with interest articulation. Yet, even with an evident gap between parties and society, and in lieu of parties in Central Asia not performing the bargaining and mobilisation function observed in other authoritarian systems, parties provide utility for informal elite groups as they seek to ensure their financial and political interests are represented in the legislature and translated into policy influence (Magaloni 2008, 716).

Utilising examples of different parties in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan this article illustrates we can discern at least two modes of interest articulation political parties perform in the region. The first is a *leverage model* whereby a party is used by elites outside of, or

close to, the regime to gain leverage for their financial and political interests. In the leverage model parties are created for the purpose of seeking greater influence over policy making. The second is a *co-ordinating model* where parties play a role in integrating the political and economic interests of a president and their stake in either state-owned or formerly state-owned enterprises. In this model the political party emerges as a way to consolidate the interests of the president or the coterie of elites close to the leader and ensure legislation pertaining to those interests has a smooth passage through parliament. These parties are often termed 'parties of power' or 'dominant parties' (Remington 2008; Greene 2010). These two models of party interest articulation are not synonyms for so-called 'opposition' and 'regime' parties. The focus here is on how parties are used as mechanisms for the representation and articulation of private interests irrespective of whether a party could be considered 'opposition' or 'regime'. The leverage/coordinating models, therefore, constitute a conceptual frame to bring to the fore some of the endogenous functions parties possess to aid regimes and elites in personalist-oriented authoritarian systems.

These three Central Asian states are insightful examples of the dynamics of the particularisation of interests in authoritarian systems and the role of political parties in that process. The three regimes possess a common political structure whereby the particularisation of private interests in exchange for resources and political positions is a fundamental component of the political system (Ishiyama 2002; Lewis 2012). In other words, these political systems are driven by patron-client networks, clientelism, patronage, corruption and most importantly loyalty (McGlinchey 2011; Peyrouse 2012; Kunysz 2012). Therefore, the cases are apt for examining the dynamics of interest articulation, its relationship with private interests, and the role of political parties in that process. Furthermore, the focus on political parties in Central Asia, and their role vis-à-vis the personalised, authoritarian and presidential nature of the regimes in the region is also important. Despite the limited scholarly interest in parties in Central Asia, the burgeoning literature on comparative institutionalism in non-democratic regimes demonstrates formal institutions can play an important role for regime stability, legitimation and the structuring of political interests, thus it is imperative not to neglect them as areas of study (Brownlee 2007; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Magaloni and Kricheli 2010; Bader 2011).

While an extremely limited literature has argued that political parties in Central Asia have function in terms of 'emulating' parties in established democracies, to aid either international

or domestic legitimation, this is a limited reading of their functionality (Polese, Ó Beacháin, and Horák 2017). International actors, NGOs and local populations are plainly aware parties in Central Asia are not the same kinds of representative organisations as understood in established liberal democracies.[ii] If imitation was their real function then it is a dismal failure. Furthermore, an understanding of the role of parties in Central Asia premised only on their mimesis in relation to their Western counterparts overlooks the main object of their imitation. It is not parties in liberal democracies which are most often mimicked, it is rather the Leninist model of the party which is most often imitated. Lenin's construct of the party organisation as a tool for a civilian authoritarian leader to control both the military and their rivals within the ruling elite is still an influential model for regime parties in Central Asia (Gandhi 2008, 36).[iii] Thus, emulation as a function of parties in Central Asia only takes us so far. A more substantial proposition is to consider is parties' endogenous role. We know parties are to some extent a form of mimesis, but what is their actual function pertaining to the internal dynamics of these personalist authoritarian systems? This is what this article seeks to do in exploring the interest articulation function of parties using the examples of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

The three countries in this article are used as illustrative examples to exemplify the way in which parties in Central Asia can perform an interest articulation function. It is not intended to be a comprehensive comparative study on the Central Asian region, and as such excludes the examples of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.[iv] This does not preclude that in the cases of either Uzbekistan or Kyrgyzstan, or in fact the three illustrative country examples discussed here, we might find that parties do not perform the function of either coordinating or leveraging private interest. Rather, the cases are used as illustrations so we can move beyond a simplified interpretation of parties' role in the region as being 'emulative' or 'façade'.

The article is based on over a decade of fieldwork in the region, drawing on an analysis of interview data, media and secondary sources. The contribution of this work is focused on furthering our understanding of how to conceptualise and think about the role of parties in Central Asia, and more broadly in personalist authoritarian regimes. But these two models are not uniform across the three cases. What the study finds is that in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan the leveraging model of party interest articulation tends fade as an influential platform for political elites as the respective presidents Nursultan Nazarbayev[v] (Kazakhstan) and Emomali Rahmon (Tajikistan) sought to consolidate power. Elites who establish leveraging parties to

articulate interests in the legislature, and/or with sources of popular support, represent a threat to presidential power and thus find themselves and their parties expunged from the political system. The case of Turkmenistan is different. In the last decade the president, Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, has sought the creation of parties other than that of the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan (DPT), ostensibly to create a more enticing environment for foreign investors (Polese, Ó Beacháin, and Horák 2017). This led to the establishment of The Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs of Turkmenistan (PIET), a leveraging party set up to articulate the interests of Turkmenistan's predominant oligarch, Alexander Dadaev.

This article is divided into four sections. The first conceptually outlines the functions of parties in authoritarian systems and makes the case these functions cannot be observed in the cases of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. The second section then outlines the two models of interest articulation that parties can perform in personalist-oriented authoritarian systems. The third and fourth sections empirically unpack these two models in relation to examples of parties in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

The Functions and Role of Parties in Authoritarian Systems

In authoritarian systems parties are understood to assist in enabling autocratic power by providing an authoritarian leader with a mechanism to broaden their base of support (Gandhi 2008; Meng 2016). Beatriz Magaloni and Ruth Kricheli propose that there are two broad roles parties perform in non-democratic regimes: 'a bargaining function, whereby the dictator uses the party to bargain with elites and minimise potential threats to their stability; and a mobilizing function, whereby dictators use the party machine to mobilize mass support' (2010, 124-126). With elite bargaining dictators use parties to 'distribute economic transfers and transfer rents, thereby co-opting potential rivals' (Magaloni and Kricheli 2010, 126). This aids dictators in ensuring elites have a stake in the longevity of the regime. Parties are also used to broaden the leadership's appeal to opposition elites by using a legislature, and by default a party, by offering outsiders limited control over policy (Gandhi 2008). Additionally, parties are utilised to co-opt oppositional elites and potential challengers into the regime by being the channel in which intertemporal power sharing deals can take place (Magaloni and Kricheli 2010; Magaloni 2006). Parties also act to build support for the regime by being a conduit through which resources are distributed to the wider population, thus serving as a patronage regime. Parties encourage regime co-optation by rewarding resources to citizens who are loyal and withdrawing them from those who are disloyal (Magaloni and Kricheli

2010, 128). To effectively undertake these duties, parties need to monopolise valuable state resources. It is the politicisation of public resources through a party which sustains not just the authoritarian regime but also the party's preeminent position (Greene 2010).

While parties in Central Asia do not perform the functions typically associated with dominant parties in authoritarian regimes, they still remain organisations for the articulation of private interests and consequently contribute to the structuring of political competition. Isaacs and Whitmore allude to this in their study of United Russia and *Nur Otan* by illustrating how pro-presidential parties act as legislative imprimaturs for presidential policy, consolidate elite support, and play a role in the discursive promotion of presidential leadership (Isaacs and Whitmore 2014, 702-703). Implicit in their analysis, but not necessarily brought to the fore, is the issue of interest articulation.

Here interest articulation is understood as the clear expression in organisational form of the political, social and economic interests of a specific individual or group of people (Almond and Coleman, 1960). In Central Asia parties involved in the coordination of interests and assets, alongside those designed to gain leverage, execute interest articulation differently from how parties assume the task in democratic systems, not least because in established democratic systems parties are articulating, for the most part, a broad range of social interests, rather than the narrow private interests found in the Central Asian cases. Below the two models of interest articulation observed in the case of Central Asia are unpacked conceptually and in the context of the specific form of personalist authoritarianism found in the region.

Two models of party interest articulation in Personalist-Oriented Authoritarian Regimes

Personalist-oriented regimes:

The Central Asian states can be broadly defined as authoritarian, in which there is limited political pluralism, ideology, and mobilisation and in which a single leader or small elite group exercise power within ill-defined limits (Linz 1964, 255). Central Asian authoritarianism is personalist and underpinned by an interaction between formal and informal politics neopatrimonial in character (Ishiyama 2002; Peyrouse 2012a; Kunysz 2012). Power is exercised as a form of private property (Erdmann and Engel 2007, 102) and

'relationships of loyalty and dependence pervade a formal political and administrative system' (Bratton and Van de Walle 1994, 458). Differently put, the lines between formality and informality are blurred. For example, senior political figures with considerable economic interests frequently use state bodies (such as the tax police) as private instruments to squeeze out potential competitors to strategic and valuable resources. While this phenomenon is commonly characterized as 'state capture' and depicted as 'criminal' activity, such behaviour is integral to the nature and conduct of power in Central Asia (Hellmann, Jones and Kaufman 2000). It is in this blurring of the public private divide where political parties emerge as interlocutors between personal economic interests and the specific roles and responsibilities of political power. There are at least two broad models for how parties perform the articulation of private interests: the leveraging and coordinating models.

Two-Models of Interest Articulation in personalist authoritarian regimes

The leveraging model of interest articulation consists of a political party representing economic and political elites as they attempt to increase leverage for the representation and articulation of their interests in the legislature. Elites, often with strong links to the regime, but not necessarily so, hope that by obtaining seats in parliament via a party organisation it will escalate opportunities for influencing and shaping policy. This can involve efforts to influence taxation laws which preference their private business interests. However, while some of the elites behind such parties are close to the regime, their independence represents a threat to the leader's complete control of the system. Thus, over time a leveraging party's influence can decline at the expense of a coordinating presidential party which seeks to recapture the political space and marginalise elite groups with independent bases of support thus stabilising and concentrating support for the leader.

The coordinating model of party interest articulation is when a party acts to support a president's interests and does so in relation to ensuring the president's policy agenda, binding elites to the president's program and promoting a discourse regarding the country's leadership (Isaacs and Whitmore 2014). However, at the same time, in promoting the policy agenda of the president, the party may be used for promoting the private economic interests of the leader. Additionally, the party may push the interests of the 'state', or the state's agenda, which may elide with the private interests of the president or other figures in the presidential administration, illustrating the blurred boundaries between the state and regime (Robinson 2012). Moreover, a party based on the coordinating model can seek to aid the

centralisation and monopolisation of autonomous political agencies and resources (such as media holdings, state-owned enterprises and other political parties) on behalf of the president or political elite as a way to ensure the protection of their private interests.

It should be re-iterated that the leveraging and coordinating models of interest articulation do not correspond to the regime-opposition dichotomy. Opposition parties can act as leveraging parties, but so can pro-presidential parties.[vi] Coordinating parties are typically the party of the president. The following analysis below provides examples of both the leveraging and coordinating models in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

Table 1. Two Models of Party Interest Articulation in Central Asian Authoritarian Systems – goes here

Leveraging Model of party interest articulation

Civic Party of Kazakhstan and *Asar*

The leveraging model of party interest articulation can be observed in Kazakhstan by examining the cases of two, now defunct, parties: The Civic Party of Kazakhstan (CPK) which existed from 1999-2006 and *Asar* (Together), operational from 2003 to 2006.

CPK was originally set up in 1998 by Aleksandr Mashkevitch, Patokh Chodiev and Alijan Ibragimov, the collective triumvirate who ran the FTSE 100 Eurasian National Resources Corporation (ENRC). The trio established ENRC in the mid-1990s, taking advantage of the early privatization process in Kazakhstan in which they purchased shares in the mining and mineral sector. The group had several subsidiaries under its control including Kazkhrom, Aliuminii Kazakhstana, Ferroalloys Factory, the Eurasian Power Corporation and Trakterbel, as well as a wide-ranging portfolio in other extractive markets including Zambia and Russia (Grosin 2005). The ENRC group were closely linked to the Nazarbayev regime, to the extent that Mashkevitch was alleged to have been the 'secret treasurer' who funded Nazarbayev's 1999 presidential election campaign (Behar 2016). While it has been suggested that the ENRC group initiated a significant lobbying effort of senior political figures in Kazakhstan during the 1990s, especially possessing close links to Nurtai Abykayev, ex-Chair of the National Security Committee, and ex-Prime Minister Daniyar Akhmetov (Kjærnet, Satpaev and Torjesen 2008), the group also created a political party to represent their interests.

CPK, labelled the party of *denezhnykh meshkov* (money bags), was understood to have been created to 'fix issues and see off problems for ENRC in the legislature'.[vii] Differently put, it was established to gain leverage for the ENRC. Led by the former Deputy General of Aliuminii Kazakhstana, Azat Peruashev, CPK helped ENRC see-off potential rivals in the mining and minerals sector (Mamashuly 2016). For example, in the late 1990s, government measures were put in place which forced out the foreign investor TWG, a direct competitor to ENRC's mining and mineral interests (Kjærnet, Satpaev and Torjesen 2008, 100). It has been argued by local analysts that this was a direct result of the lobbying of CPK representatives.[viii] The party was moderately successful during its existence. It obtained 12 seats in both the 1999 parliamentary and 2004 elections, although the latter in an electoral bloc with the Agrarian Party (Buluktaev and Chebotarev 2004). The party was unashamedly pro-presidential, supporting and advocating the policies of Nazarbayev, and backing him for the 1999 and 2005 presidential campaigns. The party drew support from local elites, especially in regions where ENRC-owned mines and factories were located such as in Pavlodar. And it was suggested by some interview informants that party membership was drawn from those that worked in factories and enterprises owned by ENRC and that to take up a job in one of the plants party membership was necessary.[ix]

Asar (Together) was also an organisation set up by a major political elite group to represent their interests in the legislature. The party was established by Dariga Nazarbayeva, the president's daughter, and her then husband, the now deceased Rakhat Aliev. While there was scepticism the party was simply a presidential whim, in reality it was independent of the presidential regime and constituted the political wing of Nazarbayeva and Aliev's private interests (Pannier 2004). The group's financial holdings included Kazatomprom (National Atomic Company), *Sakhrnyi tsentr* (Sugar Centre), *Neftianoi tsentr* (Oil Centre) and Mangistaumunaigaz (Mangistau Gas). It also had assets in the bank group NurBank and a wide-ranging media portfolio including TV stations Khabar, Europa-Plus NTK and KTK, radio stations Russkoe Radio and Radio Retro, as well as the newspapers *Novoe Pokolenie* (New Generation), *Panorama* and the popular weekly paper *Karavan* (Eurasian Transition Group 2009: 5; Junisbai 2010: 244; Isaacs 2011, 67). The group's position as part of the president's family gave them an advantage in furthering access to economic resources and political influence. The group was alleged to have access and allies in important ministries including the presidential office, the tax police and the KNB (Kazakhstan's successor to the

KGB). Aliev's influence with the tax police enabled him to benefit from investigations into rivals' business affairs, a consequence of which placed him and Nazarbayeva in the prime position to buy up strategic business assets. Aliev's influence was such that he was able demand control over some financial assets. Such as, for example, when in the early 2000s he demanded a 51% stake in Bank Turan Alem from Mukhtar Ablyazov, an oligarch and ex-Energy Minister (Junisbai 2010, 249). This led to the creation of an opposition movement, *Demokraticheskii Vybor Kazakhstana* (Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan), a platform of politicians and business leaders who were opposed to the preferential treatment Aliev and Nazarbayeva were receiving in the sell-off of formerly state-owned enterprises.

Asar secured four seats in the 2004 parliamentary election, less than the party predicted (Pannier 2004), but nevertheless it illustrated the way the party served to legitimise the interests of Nazarbayeva and Aliev and their pursuit of power (Yuritsin 2004). Predictions the party would receive 50% of the seats in the 2004 election was noted at the time as the 'equivalent to giving half the power in the country' to the president's most senior son-in-law and his family (Assandi-Times 2004; Bissenova 2003). While the party presented itself as being the more soft-hearted, population-responsive arm of the Nazarbayev regime, it was better characterised as an independent political base for Nazarbayeva and Aliev to leverage greater power and to protect their portfolio of interests.

Asar and CPK's efforts of leverage eventually fell short. In December 2006, Nazarbayev forced through the merger of the two parties with *Otan*, his own party, renaming it *Nur Otan*. The union was widely considered to be the curtailing of alternative sources of power. In particular with *Asar*, it was a sign 'the president had grown tired of his daughter's experiment in politics' (Baituova 2006). Despite pro-presidential parties winning all but one seat in the 2004 parliamentary elections, evidently the president refused to countenance cohabiting the political space with political elites with independent power bases. In the case of Kazakhstan, the emergence of parties such as CPK and *Asar* injected a degree of high-level elite pluralism into the political system which de-stabilised the power relations underpinning Nazarbayev's authority. With power premised upon loyalty and patronage, parties such as CPK and *Asar* undermined the centralisation and consolidation of Nazarbayev's power. In 2007 Nazarbayeva and Aliev found themselves out in the political wilderness, divorced from each other and their business interests, which were taken under the wing of the National Sovereign Wealth Fund, Samruk Kazyna. Mashkevitch too found his stake in ENRC reduced and

bought out by Kazakhmys and he subsequently 'lost interest in politics'[x] signalling the beginning of the end of the ENRC's political influence (Mesquita 2015).

While CPK and *Asar* ceased to exist over a decade ago, they serve to demonstrate the perceived utility of parties for elites. They embody the blurring between the private and the public and the extent to which economic elites will seek to influence policy making by having their own troupe of legislators to watch over interests and fix problems. CPK and *Asar* are demonstrative of the way parties played a critical role in the early 2000s in Kazakhstan, not least for the articulation of interests, but also for the structuring of elite competition over economic and political resources. That leveraging types parties failed in these instances also alludes to the way a party such as *Nur Otan* can be used to coordinate disparate interests under a single banner of regime support.

The Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs of Turkmenistan

A further example of a leveraging party is The Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs of Turkmenistan (PIET) established in 2012. PIET emerged from the already existing Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs of Turkmenistan (UIET), itself created in 2007 as an early signal to foreign investors from the then new president, Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, that his presidency was interested in liberalising some parts of the highly centralised economy. The key figure behind UIET and PIET, and their private sponsor, is Alexander Dadaev, Turkmenistan's principal oligarch (Vasilenkov 2012). Dadaev is head of the largest private business in Turkmenistan, Gush Toplumy (The Poultry Complex), is the owner of Rysgal, the only private bank in the country, the founder of the only private newspaper, also named Rysgal, and deputy chairman of the Turkmen-Russian Business Council (Lenta 2012). The creation of PIET marked Turkmenistan's shift towards 'façade multipartism' – until then the former Communist Party, the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan, had been the only legal party. PIET gave legislative voice and a formal political organisation to Dadaev's interests. In the inherently statist Turkmen economy Dadaev is an oddity, a successful entrepreneur. However, his business success was achieved because of the informal benefaction of Berdymukhamedov, a patronage legitimised through PIET.

UIET and PIET have proved useful apparatuses for the promotion and articulation of Dadaev's interests. Such representation ensured the Turkmen legislature approved legislation which has benefited Gush Toplumy including: a 70 billion manat loan; the allocation of

prime land for the construction of a new complex; exemption from custom duties; and a three-year release from the profit tax (Rozydzhumaev 2013). UIET was also given preference for public construction contracts, a sector previously the domain of Turkish construction companies, including high-rise residential buildings, a livestock market, a multi-level parking lot and cottage villages in Ashgabat (Rozydzhumaev 2013). This has given Dadaev and UIET a dominance over aspects of the growing private sector in the country. For instance, reports from within Turkmenistan claim that 'overwhelmingly the majority of entrepreneurs are forced to apply for loans from Rysgal' (Chronikatm.com 2012). Since 2009, Dadaev has risen to the highest influence in Turkmenistan, regularly attending cabinet gatherings and meeting with foreign delegations (Rozydzhumaev 2013) and this has translated into a larger share of the domestic economy. It has been reported that UIET now controls a 60 percent share of non-hydrocarbons Turkmen exports (Durdyzhan 2018). Moreover, those entrepreneurs who contribute to UIET and PIET receive preferential treatment from the president. For example, in 2018, in honour of the president's birthday, businessmen associated with the PIET were allowed to convert up to three percent of finances held in their accounts into dollars (Chronikatm.com 2018).

PIET, therefore, has emerged as an apparatus for the articulation and representation of private interests. If the cases of *Asar* and CPK in Kazakhstan are any guide then it is clear that the presidential executive in Turkmenistan might soon tire of a political and economic elite who have an independent power base, although Dadaev does not possess the political autonomy the ENRC troika and Dariga Nazarbayeva and Rakhat Aliev held. While the decision to allow the creation of PIET was viewed as a sop to Western investors, there is already evidence of the potential decline of PIET's influence (Lenta 2012). The party obtained 14 seats in the 2013 elections to the *Mejilis*, but this was reduced to 11 in 2018 in which they competed against another new party, the Agrarian Party as well as the long-established DPT. Of course, we should be under no illusion that PIET represents any form of alternative to DPT and Berdymukhamedov. PIET offers an electoral programme very similar to that of the DPT and is supportive of the president's agenda (Nichol 2013). And as noted above, the party's position, and the benefits and preferences Dadaev and PIET receive, are as a consequence of Berdymukhamedov's benefaction.

Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT)

The IRPT is a different example of a leveraging party in Central Asia by virtue of its evolution from a movement involved in a military conflict (the Tajik civil war 1992-97) to a broader-based social oppositional movement with a clear ideological identity, widespread public support and organisational capacity.[xi] The roots of the IRPT stretch back to the late 1970s and a covert religious youth movement, *Nahzat-i Islomi*, created by Said Abdullo Nuri (Olimova 1999). By 1990 it had evolved into a larger movement which sought recognition of party status by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Tajikistan. Initially, the IRPT was banned, but with independence the Supreme Soviet granted the party registration and its first congress was held in October 1991 (Olimova and Olimov 2001). Much has been written about the IRPT. It stood out in the landscape of party politics in Central Asia not least for being the only legally registered religious party among the five Central Asian states. Moreover, in a region awash with parties premised on personalist politics, the IRPT possesses clear ideological parameters, so much so, scholarly literature has concentrated on the party's Islamic character and its relationship to a perceived Islamic revival rather than its specific character as a political party (Hetmanek 1993; Zelkina 1999; Tazmini 2001; Heathershaw 2009; Lemon 2016). Analysis has also centred on the Rahmon regime's securitisation of Islam and the IRPT, challenging the authorities' insistence that the party supports violence as opposed to the moderate democratic ideology it espouses (Yilmaz 2009, 141-145). The IRPT also had well-developed grassroots support, which it has maintained through sponsorship of sporting, religious and community events as well as small-scale protests (Fieman 2009). Arguably, therefore, the IRPT could be perceived as a conventional political party as understood in Western politics with regards to its ideological and organisational capacity.

But the IRPT is not a conventional party. In the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR the party formed part of the United Tajik Opposition alongside democratic and nationalist forces which fought the Tajik civil war against Khujandi/Kulyabi government armies backed by Emomali Rahmon. The IRPT is believed to have received military support and training from the Afghan mujahidin and Iranian supporters (Yilmaz 2009, 139). Thus, in the post-war environment the party had to transform from a movement engaged in military activity to a civilian political party (Olimova and Tolipov 2011). But the forging of the IRPT in the context of civil war had consequences for how the party emerged as an organisation for the representation and leverage of key interests. The Tajik civil war was a conflict between various sectional elite interests over who would control the newly independent state (Abdullaev and Barnes 2001; Tunçer-Kılavuz 2009, 665). Thus, the 'disparity between the

distribution of power and the distribution of benefits was an important factor in the eruption of civil war in Tajikistan' (Tunçer-Kılavuz 2011, 272). And IRPT was an organisation which sought leverage in the aftermath of the Soviet period for the representation and articulation of specific group interests. As Saodat Olimova and Muzaffar Olimov (2001, 26) have argued, 'the IRPT was more than a religious movement; it was also a social and political phenomenon' in which leaders sought to use the party 'to redistribute state property and power to benefit themselves'. IRPT is understood to represent the interests of key elites from Rasht Valley (also known as the Qarateghin region), the area of Tajikistan in which Nuri had his power base (Olimova and Olimov 2001). Nuri mobilised his network of regional supporters during the civil war and in the aftermath the party was used to distribute the spoils gained as a consequence of the peace accord signed in 1997 (Tunçer-Kılavuz 2009, 700; Olimov and Bowyer 2002). As part of the agreement IRPT received a significant share of the spoils including 30 percent of senior government posts (Karagiannis 2006).

Like *Asar* and CPK in Kazakhstan, the IRPT's position as a party seeking leverage for the interests of its leaders and supporters has been erased. In the 2000, 2005 and 2010 parliamentary elections the party achieved only seven percent of the vote and two seats respectively in each convocation of the *Majlisi namoyandagon* (Assembly of Representatives). The party has always believed that election results have never reflected their genuine level of support (Foroughi 2011). Despite co-existence with the Rahmon regime, the IRPT's presence in government gradually dwindled over 18 years (Pannier 2018). The regime tolerated the IRPT because the fragile nature of the peace process required the party's participation, but in 2015, emboldened by his tightening grip over the state apparatus, Rahmon moved against party leader Muhiddin Kabiri and the IRPT. In the 2015 election the party lost its two seats and in the aftermath of the vote the security services launched a campaign against the IRPT arresting politicians, officials and supporters. The party was forced to close down branches and operations by the Ministry of Justice in August 2015 for failing to meet membership quotas and then the following month at the request of the General Prosecutor, the Supreme Court outlawed the party and declared it a terrorist organisation (Lozovsky 2018).

The banning of IRPT was the culmination of Rahmon's consolidation of power since hostilities ceased in 1997. Since the signing of the peace accord, firstly under Nuri, and then after his death in 2006 under Kabiri, the party put forward a moderate and non-

confrontational programme committed to non-violent democratic values. The IRPT became an effective social movement and was probably the most popular opposition movement in the country, especially among the youth and unemployed (Lozovsky 2018). Therefore, in many ways it was a conventional political party in terms of its social reach. But the party, especially during the period of the civil war and its immediate aftermath, can also be understood as a party seeking leverage for the interests of elite groups. Nevertheless, as in other personalist authoritarian regimes political parties which leverage on behalf of the interests of competing elite groups soon find themselves in threat of extinction. And, as in the case of Kazakhstan, it is the second model of party interest articulation, the coordinating model, which tends to benefit and dominate as the influence of leveraging parties dissipates.

Coordinating Model of party interest articulation

Parties which represent the presidents of Central Asian regimes act to articulate the political interests of those presidents (Isaacs 2011; Isaacs and Whitmore 2014). *Nur Otan*, the PDPT and the DPT purposely act as the legislative arms of Nazarbayev, Rahmon and Berdymukhamedov respectively, even though the parliaments in each of these countries are ineffective at checking the power of the executive. In the post-Soviet space these types of parties are often termed ‘parties of power’ (as distinct from parties with power) or ‘dominant parties’ (Remington 2008; Reuter 2017). In many ways they are not dominant parties. They do not possess the agency to either distribute or allocate resources to potential elite rivals which is often the preserve of dominant parties in non-democratic regimes in other parts of the world. Rather they are legislative foot soldiers deployed to guarantee that the president’s agenda is stewarded through parliament and is legitimised through formal constitutional mechanisms. They also provide a platform for the promotion of a discourse regarding the centrality of the president for the success and prosperity of the country. Importantly, they can also be utilised as mechanism through which to centralise and neutralise other elite groups which take up the political space and possess separate power bases and interests from the president.

An analysis of all of the pro-presidential personalist dominant parties in Central Asia is challenging for reasons of space and access to data. Consequently, the analysis here relies briefly on the DPT and then predominantly on *Nur Otan* and as illustrative examples of how they can perform the role of the coordinating model of party interest articulation.

The Democratic Party of Turkmenistan

As inferred above, until 2012 the DPT was the only formally registered political party in Turkmenistan. It was created the same afternoon in 1991 that the Communist Party of Turkmenistan was disbanded at its 25th and final congress, in the same hall with the same officials. The DPT was the CPT in all but name, albeit without its predecessors' power, but the party remained the 'main force of support of the economic reforms and of presidential power' (Dudarev 2001, 137). The personalist nature of the political system meant that Niyazov's dominance translated into control over the production of raw primary commodities in the country including the gas, oil and cotton industries (Kuliev 2001). The party, thus, was seen as the legislative front of Niyazov's rule, and party structures were 'closely linked to executive bodies and state administration, if not super-imposed on or integrated into it' (OSCE/ODHIR 1999, 7). The Party, therefore, was a mechanism for the articulation and representation of Niyazov's political interests within the legislature. Simply put, the DPT was used to concentrate and coordinate elite and broader public support behind the president's policy agenda, and ensure that legislation, constitutional changes and policy were implemented to reflect and articulate the interests of the president. Arguably the party is still used in the same way by Berdymukhamedov, even though he resigned the leadership of the party in 2013 wanting to be seen as 'above politics' (Polese and Horák 2015).

Nur Otan

Nur Otan was created in its current form to bring together other political parties which claimed to represent and support Nazarbayev's agenda, but in fact where articulating the interests of other elite groups. In this case it was the aforementioned CPK and *Asar*. These parties were forced to join with *Nur Otan* in 2006, thus consolidating the president's grip of the *Mazhilis* and the broader political system and squeezing out the other elite groups' parties which were being used as a way to obtain leverage in the political system.

With *Nur Otan* fully dominant in the legislature (the party won all the seats in the 2007 election) Nazarbayev had a fully compliant legislature to push through his political interests. For example, in 2007, amendments to the constitution were passed which allowed the president to run for unlimited terms. In 2010, parliament granted Nazarbayev special status as 'leader of the nation', giving him influence over domestic and foreign policy decision-making by giving him a permanent seat on the Constitutional Council and Security Council once he retired.[xii] The law also gave immunity to the president and his family and protected

the assets they acquired while he was in office (Mesquita 2016). Such behaviour has been persistently characterised as 'kleptocratic' (Peyrouse 2012a; Judah 2016. Simply put, the regime runs the country 'primarily in the interests of the president's family and its close associates' (Global Witness 2015, 3).

There is a lack of clarity as to whether a direct linkage can be observed between the president's private interests and the extent to which *Nur Otan* and the *Mazhilis* are utilised to push through legislation to advantage those interests. There is a cloak of secrecy and opaqueness regarding the president's economic interests. And, moreover, the boundaries are blurred between supposedly state-owned companies and holdings and the extent to which the president may or may not have specific private interests in them. *Nur Otan* operates as a platform to articulate, confirm and legitimise legislation and presidential policy-making related to state companies, institutions and organisations (Isaacs and Whitmore 2014). Thus, if it is possible to observe linkages between state run companies and the private interests of the president – then there is mileage in the idea that *Nur Otan*, in its support of government policies related to state-funded companies, is acting to coordinate and articulate those private interests. One such example is the country's National Welfare Fund Samruk-Kazyna in which the main economic assets of the country were consolidated in 2008. With 400 subsidiaries under its holding, and in the region of $74.3 billion assets, Samruk-Kazyna is the largest single actor in the Kazakh economy which according to the OCED accounts for over half of the country's GDP (Pomfret 2019, 90). However, as Mesquita has noted, Article 12 of the Law of the National Welfare Fund stipulates that the president of Kazakhstan can unilaterally intervene in the fund's operational activities' (Mesquita 2016, 377). The government remains the sole shareholder with the power to appoint and dismiss the board of directors (Mesquita 2016, 378). Nazarbayev, as head of the government, has overall responsibility for Samruk-Kazyna.

A similar blurring between the public and private can be observed in relation to the giant copper mining company Kazakhmys which is privately run by its owner Cuprum Holding. The company was one of the first in the former Soviet Union to be listed on the London Stock Exchange. A report conducted by Global Witness in 2010 made claims that Nazarbayev held undue influence over the company (Global Witness 2012). Further claims from exiled Kazakh politician, businessman and oppositionist, Mukhtar Ablyazov, states more bluntly that it is Nazarbayev who in effect owns the company (with a profit of 1.4

billion dollars annually) (Ablyazov 2012). Ablyazov further claims the president obtained majority shares in the company as part of the privatization process in the 1990s and early 2000s at a significantly reduced cost and that his ownership is masked by a series of shell companies allegedly managed and run by his brother Bolat Nazarbayev and close confident Vladimir Kim, who is officially the largest shareholder (Ablyazov 2012).

These types of claims have to be treated with caution. Details are opaque and Ablyazov's bias as a source should treated with care, even if some of his claims are well-supported by a 2010 Global Witness Report and have been reinforced by court documents in London (Goodley 2010). Nevertheless, it is not the first-time financial scandals reached the office of the president. A previous scandal regarding payment the Nazarbayev received in the early 1990s from the signing of oil deals with US companies has dogged him for years (known as the James Giffen and Kazakhgate scandal). Nonetheless, in 2009-10 Samruk-Kazyna, on the basis of a decree by the president, and initiated by the State Committee of Property and Privatization in the Ministry of Finance, approved the purchasing of an 11% stake in Kazakhmys. The allegation is that Nazarbayev was using state funds to consolidate his ownership of the company (Ablyazov 2012). While *Nur Otan* deputies had no role in passing or confirming the decision, the Parliamentary Committee on Finance and the Budget (dominated by *Nur Otan* deputies) provided no serious oversight of the policy. Moreover, there are at least two *Mazhilis Nur Otan* deputies who were former senior employees of Kazakhmys – demonstrating a tangential link between the company and parliamentary deputies representing the company's interests in the legislature.[xiii]

Nur Otan, therefore, has performed an important role in coordinating and articulating the political and economic interests of the president and his close associates. This has included consolidating the political interests of the president via the merger of smaller pro-presidential parties into *Nur Otan* along with the mass mobilisation of state employees into the party's membership (Isaacs and Whitmore 2014, 707). In economic terms, arguably the party plays a role in waving through and ensuring there is no legislative hold up to, or scrutiny of, policies or take-overs which blur the lines between the public and private in the financial interests of the president.

Conclusion

While it is often assumed political parties play no significant role in Central Asia beyond emulating parties in liberal democracies for an international audience, this study has argued parties do perform a function in relation to the articulation and representation of economic and political interests of elite groups. The particular condition of neopatrimonialism in Central Asia has produced at least two forms of party interest articulation: a leveraging and coordinating model. As the examples from Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan have shown neither of these models are uniform and the dynamics of leveraging or coordinating depend on the context of the regime. In the instances of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan parties such as *Nur Otan* and the PDPT aid in the centralisation of political control by swallowing up (as in the case of *Nur Otan)* or aiding the marginalisation of leveraging parties (as in the case of the PDPT). The case of Turkmenistan is different. After years of single-party dominance, a leveraging party has emerged as a consequence of the desire of the president to demonstrate a barely plausible veneer of pluralism (driven by the need for Foreign Direct Investment). PIET and Dadaev will most likely avoid the fate of *Asar*, CPK and IRPT. The Turkmen political system remains firmly under the control of Berdymukhamedov. PIET and Dadaev are entirely reliant for their position on the patronage of the president. To this extent, they have no genuine power, agency or support which is separate from the president. This was different to the case of leveraging parties in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.

This article has not been an exhaustive account of either leveraging or coordinating types of parties in Central Asia or beyond. As Jennifer Gandhi has argued, party systems in dictatorships exhibit much variation because rules or norms 'generally do not exist for how dictators should organize political life', thus institutional arrangements can vary from regime to regime (Gandhi 2008, 36). Such variation exists in Central Asia when it comes to the role of political parties. While we could point to further examples of opposition parties in Kazakhstan such as the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan, *Ak Zhol* (Bright Path) and *Azat* (Freedom) as fitting the leveraging model (Junisbai and Junisbai 2005; Isaacs 2011), in the case of Uzbekistan it is less clear cut. In Uzbekistan Arkady Dubnov has noted that there is no evidence linking parties, party factions and parliamentary deputies to the interest of so-called 'clan groups' (Bologov 2014). It suggests parties may not perform a leveraging role for elite interests. Moreover, in the *Oliy Majlis* (the Uzbek parliament) the five sitting parties are all pro-presidential. There is no single coordinating presidential party in Uzbekistan as there is in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. It perhaps suggests that in the case of Uzbekistan at least we need to dig a little deeper in terms of identifying the endogenous

purpose of the institutional arrangements of parties in the country. In Kyrgyzstan parties are often utilised by economic elites who are seeking to shape policy to protect their interests. It is argued that this is achieved through individual businessmen making substantial donations to political parties so as to be included on a party list for parliamentary elections (Kulov 2019).[xiv] Thus, parties in Kyrgyzstan could also be understood to have a function in providing economic elites with leverage to shape policy to reflect their interests. But Kyrgyzstan lacks a successful example of a coordinating party. The only real attempt being Kurmanbek Bakiyev's *Ak Zhol* which disintegrated in the aftermath of the 2010 uprising. It demonstrates how variations between institutional arrangements of party systems in Central Asia is conditioned by the specific characteristics of each political system, given Kyrgyzstan's more pluralistic (but not liberal democratic) political environment.

Both the leveraging and coordinating model of party interest articulation illustrate that contrary to claims political parties are insignificant to internal political processes in the region, in fact they do have an important role to play in the structuring of elite competition and the struggle for power and influence. This is not to suggest that they are the most important element of authoritarian power in the region. Rather they are part of the mosaic of authoritarian rule. As our understanding of how authoritarian systems work becomes more complex, so it is that we need to develop a deeper appreciation of the varying cogs in the wheel of authoritarian power – and political parties are but one element.

This article sought to provide a greater insight into how we can conceptualise the experience of political parties in the personalist-oriented authoritarian regimes of Central Asia. Nevertheless, more research is required to fully understand the role and place of political parties in the region. In particular, more understanding is required to appreciate how parties play a role in the designing and providing oversight of legislation advantageous to the private interests of political elites.

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Notes

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[ii] And neither should we have any expectation that they should be.

[iii] This is not a claim that pro-presidential parties in Central Asia, such as *Nur Otan*, The Democratic Party of Turkmenistan and the People’s Democratic Party of Tajikistan are the same type of organisation as the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). They do not possess the same kind of agency the CPSU was granted in the USSR. Rather, the CPSU is the overarching model upon which presidential dominant parties in Central Asia are based on, albeit they lack the genuine institutional power over state structures which the CPSU had.

[iv] Parties in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are, to some extent, outliers when it comes to the issue of interest articulation. Kyrgyzstan’s political system is more open, dynamic and plural than other Central Asian states. Thus, it represents a different point of comparison. In Uzbekistan there is no available evidence to suggest elites are using parties to articulate their private interests. Likewise, there is no single coordinating pro-presidential party in Uzbekistan, as there is in other Central Asian republics. Therefore, this article is not intended to be a comparative study of party systems in Central Asia, rather examples of parties from Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan are used to illustrates where parties perform one of the two models of private interest articulation.

[v] Even though Nazarbayev resigned the presidency in March 2019, most analysts would agree that he remains in power in Kazakhstan despite Kassym-Jomart Tokayev being elected president in June 2019. It is still widely believed that Nazarbayev maintains an office (and whole floor) in the Ak Orda (presidential palace) above that of the new Tokyaev administration. Nazarbayev continues to hold significant constitutional positions in the country giving him oversight over foreign policy and national security and moreover, *Nur Otan* remains, at least for the time being, his political party.

[vi] Pro-presidential parties do not necessarily have to be the president’s party, just parties which offer full support of a president’s agenda. They are often created by powerful elite groups and/or by the regime to provide a cosmetic representation of particular social constituencies (i.e. the agrarian sector or industrial entrepreneurs).

[vii] Author's interview with anonymous International NGO representative, 6 March 2007, Almaty, Kazakhstan.
[viii] Author's interview with local analyst, 14 March 2007, Almaty, Kazakhstan.
[ix] Author's interview with analyst from an NGO, 2 November 2006, Almaty.
[x] Authors interview with anonymous political analyst, 8 July 2011, Almaty, Kazakhstan.
[xi] The IRPT is the only so-called 'opposition' party discussed in this article. However, as mentioned in the introduction, the 'opposition'/'regime' binary is not the conceptual focus of this article. Instead, the attention is on how parties are and have been used as the mechanisms for the representation and articulation of private interests irrespective of whether the party could be considered 'opposition' or 'regime'.
[xii] In 2018 parliamentary deputies also approved a bill which made Nazarbayev the Security Council Chairman for life.
[xiii] Arman Tuleshovich Kozhakhmet who has been a *Nur Otan* deputy since 2011 served as Deputy Director, Director of Legal Services Department of Kazakhmys Corporation from 2001-2012. Aliyar Arystanovich Zharaspaev was Director of the Department of Social Affairs and Advisor to the Chairman of the Board of Kazakhmys from 2001 until 2007 when he was elected as a member of parliament on the *Nur Otan* party list for the 4th convocation of the *Mazhilis.*
[xiv] Author's interview with Iskhak Masaliev, Jogorku kenesh deputy, leader of the Communist Party of Kyrgyzstan, 15th Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.